Apothegm

The Monarchical Episcopate

When we use the term 'Monarchical Episcopate,' it refers to the idea that a single bishop was appointed as the leader of a geographic area, usually a city. Bishops are the successors of the apostles, appointed by them to lead (CCC 77). In the New Testament, Titus is told to "appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). We must recall that in the letter to Titus the terms 'elder/presbyter' and 'bishop' are used without a distinction between the two terms (cf. Titus 1:5-9). There is strong evidence that by the end of the second century a clear distinction between 'bishops' and 'presbyters' was made. One sees the pattern of a single bishop leading a community. Prior to this time there may well have existed communities which collegial leadership existed without a 'residential bishop.' This makes sense where originally an apostle was giving leadership to the community (either directly or through his delegate), and then after the passing of the apostle a transition to a new leadership model would emerge. It is likely that some communities initially had a more collegial type of leadership while others quickly had a single leader. By mid-second century, the pattern of a single bishop in each town claiming full apostolic ministry and assisted by a council of presbyters emerged. St. Clement of Rome (c. 96 A.D.) notes,

"Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. We are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and disinterested spirit, and have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all, cannot be justly dismissed from the ministry." (1 Clement 44)

The fact that Clement says "*we* are of the opinion" in the above passage and does not explicitly name himself the 'Bishop of Rome' in his letter has led some modern interpreters to say that Clement's letter *must* be viewed as evidence that the church in Rome had *only* collegial leadership in this time period. Many Protestant

interpreters feel compelled to argue that there was no single bishop administering the Roman church. Some even speculate further the leaders of the Roman church were scattered among house churches and were no more than parish priests without a central leader. This seems like a rather heavy burden of speculation to place on the single word 'we'. While it is certainly possible there was a time of transition between the direct leadership of the apostles and a single bishop ruling the church of Rome, as Otto Karrer has pointed out it is very reasonable to believe the bishop-presbyters worked together and that "one of them was probably responsible for unity amongst his colleges and within the congregation as a whole." The one responsible for this leadership was soon called the 'bishop.' Other examples from the same era show exactly this picture. St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-107 A.D.) who is himself a bishop, in his Letter to the Ephesians describes the bishops "who have been appointed throughout the world" (3:2). He writes;

"Wherefore it is fitting that ye should run together in accordance with the will of your bishop, which thing also ye do. For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp. Therefore in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung" (Ign. Ephesians 4:1).

While the terms 'bishop' and 'elder/ presbyter' were not clearly distinguished in the New Testament, the communities St. Ignatius writes to across Asia have three clearly distinguished offices: bishop, presbyter, and deacon. One can see this again in St. Ignatius' *Letter to the Trallians*, He writes;

Similarly let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, as also the bishop who is a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God and as the band of the apostles. Nothing can be called a church without these. (Trallians 3:1)

Even more boldly St. Ignatius writes to the Smyrnaeans;

"You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ (followed) the Father, and (follow) the presbytery as the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything apart from the bishop that has to do with the church. Let that be regarded as a valid Eucharist which is held under the bishop or to whomever he entrusts it" (Smyrnaeans 8:1).

While some scholars see St. Ignatius' early second century comments as an endorsement and promotion of what would eventually be the norm in the mid-second century, there is little evidence of resistance. One suspects the scholarly attempt to emphasize earlier diversity in church order is motivated not by

historical integrity but by the desire to dissent from modern church order.

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